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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses ways in which problem-solving in social situations differs from and is more difficult than problem-solving in other areas. Some of these ways are that social situations are constantly changing, communication is frequently unclear, and strong emotions are often aroused. Problems related to evaluation are discussed as an example of social problem-solving in classrooms, and strategies used by students to maximize success and minimize failure are described. Strategies are of two kinds: one kind avoids failure by reinterpreting evaluation situations by means such as attributions, modified personal standards, and diminished effort. Another kind of strategy attempts to subvert or manipulate the evaluation process. Implications for teachers are discussed. (Author)

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Social Problem-Solving in Classrooms

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Abstract

This paper discusses ways in which problem-solving in social situations differs from and is more difficult than problem-solving in other areas. Some of these ways are that social situations are constantly changing, communication is frequently unclear, and strong emotions are often aroused. Problems related to evaluation are discussed as an example of social problem-solving in classrooms, and strategies used by students to maximize success and minimize failure are described. Strategies are of two kinds. One kind avoids failure by reinterpreting evaluation situations by means such as attributions, modified personal standards, and diminished effort. Another kind of strategy attempts to subvert or manipulate the evaluation process. Implications for teachers are discussed.

Although problem-solving skills may not be sufficiently emphasized in the curriculum, children develop and use these skills to varying degrees in their daily dealings with the social networks of which they are a part. In their interactions with peers, teachers, and parents they learn strategies to maximize positive outcomes and minimize those that they find unpleasant. This presentation will discuss problem-solving is social areas, outlining ways in which social problem-solving is different from and in some ways more difficult than other kinds of problem-solving children may be called upon to accomplish. It will then focus upon problems posed by the evaluative nature of classrooms, to describe the variety of strategies that are used.

Characteristics of Problem-Solving in Social Areas

For this presentation, a problem will be said to occur "when the individual is confronted with a situation for which he or she does not have a solution, and for which no set pattern or procedure exists" (Hudgins, et.al. 1983). It is implied in this definition that the individual has a goal in mind that he or she wishes to attain. Social problems are those that involve other people, and they are different from nonsocial problems in a number of ways (Glick, 1978). First, the social world is not unchanging, and one cannot assume either predictability or stability of the behaviors or internal states of others involved. Second, information regarding the relevant attitudes of others are communicated in a variety of verbal and non-verbal ways, and cultural specificity, subtlety, and even deception are frequent characteristics of the information sources that must be understood to act effectively. Other complicating factors are due to the strong emotions often aroused in social situations, which make objective problem-solving difficult, and to the existence of multiple levels of

consequences of social outcomes that are interrelated in complex and affectively changed ways. The usual stages of problem-solving (defining the problem, proposing alternative solutions to the problem, evaluating solutions before acting upon them (Hudgins et. al., 1983) are made more complex by the "shifting sands" of social situations. Individuals must "a) accurately perceive and interpret social cues, b) select an appropriate strategy for reaching their goal, c) implement the strategy by implementing appropriate motoric responses, and d) coordinate their social performance with other individuals by attending to the ongoing feedback from other social interactions", (McClure, Chinsky, and Larcen, 1978). Thus a variety of social skills and kinds of knowledge are required to negotiate positive outcomes to social problems.

Contrary to what one would expect, young children who can effectively generate solutions to social problems that are posed to them (such as making friends in a new neighborhood, getting to play with a toy that another child is using) are not necessarily those who are able to solve nonsocial problems (Shure, 1982). As Shure describes, some children and adolescents who solve non-social problems satisfactorily just do not think about consequences of social acts, and behave impulsively to attain their goals. Such a child, when injured by another, tends to perceive the problem as being that someone hit him, and see the fact that he hit the other child first as being irrelevant to the problem situation. These children tend to become frustrated and to aggress or withdraw when impulsive strategies do not work. They fail to generate alternative solutions to social problems when their initial solution fails. Thus the intense and immediate ego-involvement of children in social problems creates situations in which they do not use their usual problem-solving cognitive strategies.

Evaluation as a Problem Area

One area of social problem-solving that is salient to classroom participants at all levels is that of evaluation. Although theoretically evaluation could consist of an objective comparison of student performance with a clearly defined standard of excellence, in reality evaluation is a complex and personalized activity that is embedded in the social context of the classroom. Blumenfeld (1982) describes the nature of the problems that occur in this area, noting that the lack of a clear evaluative map leads teachers to miscommunicate their expectations and students to therefore misplace their efforts. For the student, the central problem of evaluation is to attain success and avoid failure. This is of course made more difficult by the special characteristics of "social" problems. Failure and success are not clearly defined, and students are often at a loss to interpret the feedback they get (e.g., two wrong, four wrong). Teachers' use of praise is frequently more related to a wish to encourage children than to their objective performance (Brophy, 1981). Criteria for success change with age and the increasing competence the child, and different teachers and subjects vary with regard to the kinds of criteria (neatness, content, creativity, correctness) by which success and failure are judged. In addition, there are many audiences who may make the judgement of success or failure. The remainder of this paper will outline ways in which students deal with the problems posed by evaluation, including redefinitions of the problems and generating strategies for maximizing positive evaluation and minimizing negative evaluations.

Strategies for Avoiding Failure and Maximizing Postive Self-Evaluations

Students use many strategies to avoid failure. Heckhausen (1982) found that in an experimentally induced failure situation, very young children (aged 4½) had many strategies for avoiding the admission of failure. They lied and said they succeeded, cheated in a variety of ways, discussed previous successes rather than the failure event they were asked about, and withdrew from the situation. The strategies used by older children are described by Covington and Beery (1976). One group of strategies involves underachievement or subverting effort, so that an objective failure event need not be personally interpreted as a "real" failure in ability. These strategies include non-participation, false effort, setting impossibly high goals, denying the value of success in school, and extolling failure as a mark of non-conformity. Weiner (1980) noted similar strategies in underachieveing adolescents, and found "unintentional" subversion of effort (e.g., forgetting one's homework assignment, falling asleep before one finished his work) to be frequently evident. Still other strategies are categorized by Covington and Beery as "avoiding failure by insuring success" by such means as low goal-setting or cheating. Schwartz's ethnographic description (1981) of strategies used in low-track classrooms found all these strategies to be used, particularly withdrawal from academic activities by absence or concerted inattention to instructional activities. Indeed, some children deny that school success is a goal for them, thereby defining an obvious problem situation as personally irrelevant (Frieze, 1983).

Still other strategies for dealing with problematic evaluations involved maximizing success by manipulating the interpretation of failure events. This strategy is seen in situations in which social comparison is the basis for the task standard, and the individual selects others of a lower ability or skill level (e.g., younger children) with which to compare (Levine, 1983). The description Suls and Mullen (1982) give of

social comparision over the life-cycle suggests further strategies for avoiding failure. They assert that young children tend to use temporal comparisons (comparison of present with previous performance) to judge competence. Since the abilities of youngsters are growing rapidly, such comparisons tend to be positive. Among the elderly, however, comparisons of present and past achievement would probably be unflattering, so such comparisons are not frequently sought.

It might be useful to clarify the value of causal attributions for maximizing subjective success and minimizing failure. As implied by the underachiever's lack of effort, if objective failures can be attributed to lack of effort, bad luck, teacher unfairness, or anything other than lack of ability, the failure is not so devastating to the individual's self-evaluation (Weiner, 1976). Attrubutional strategies for achieving success and avoiding failure, such as blaming failure on task difficulty or teacher unfairness rather than inability, are frequently seen in classrooms.

Subverting the Evaluation Process

Many students seek to solve the problem of maximizing positive evaluations by subverting the evaluation process by reducing task demands in a variety of ways. Doyle (1983) documents the strategies used, which will be familiar to teachers. Students avoid negative evaluations when they are called upon to respond orally to questions by raising other issues rather than answering questions and by stalling until someone else (perhaps the teacher) answers for them. They restrict their output in both oral and written answers, in order to reduce their possibility of error. They attempt to reduce the degree of ambiguity and risk in task demands by trying to get the teacher to convert "reasoning" assignments into algorithmic ones, by repeated demands for examples

and clarifications, and by trying to find out exactly what will be asked for on tests. Thus higher order cognitive demands are sometimes reduced to rote processes or memory demands, which offer the student greater certainty of positive evaluation. Students also appeal to the teacher for greater generosity in evaluation and easier requirements for grades. The use of cheating to avoid task demands is well known, and is documented by Schwartz (1981) in her description of a class in which cheating was so widespread that a spelling test had to be cancelled. While teachers may agree that these strategies for solving the problem of evaluation are detrimental to school learning, students have apparently found them to be effective. Teachers also may feel the need to solve evaluation problems in ways that may not support higher level learning, such as when they give in to the demands of their classes for easier evaluation in the interest of maintaining good will in the classroom. They also resort to evaluating behaviors such as task completion and quiet working, rather than quality of product or evidence of having learned the material. In this way students whose behavior supports the teacher's classroom management goals can be rewarded and encouraged, and teachers can avoid making difficult decisions about quality of achievement.

Conclusion

This brief overview of strategies used to solve social problems posed by the evaluative nature of classrooms illustrates the complexity common to social problems. For students, the goal of maximizing positive evaluation and minimizing possibilities for failure can be attained by a number of problem definitions and alternative solutions. Some involve manipulation of the environment by cheating or by convincing the teacher to change performance demands. Others involve internal reinterpretation of evaluative events, such

as by selecting inferior others with whom to compare one's outcomes, or by attributing failure to lack of effort or luck. Students might alternatively pursue the most obvious and educationally desirable strategy, that of working hard to learn, to perform, and to achieve success.

The social and interactive nature of the problem of evaluation is demonstrated by the fact that teachers also feel the need to solve evaluation problems in a variety of ways, and by the reciprocal nature of the teacher's and the student's problems. Teachers solve evaluation problems by reducing performance demands, by evaluating according to easily definable rather than genuinely appropriate criteria, and by rewarding compliance rather than quality of achievement. One would hope that teachers would usually try to solve evaluation problems by presenting clearly defined and appropriate criteria by which they can defend the educational soundness of their judgements. In any case, it is clear that solutions to the problems of classroom evaluation are negotiated, for better or for worse, in the changing, complex, interactive, social context of ongoing classroom life.

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